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The Winter of the Soviet Military: Cohesion or Collapse?

National Intelligence Estimate

This National Intelligence Estimate represents the views of the Director of Central Intelligence with the advice and assistance of the US Intelligence Community.

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The Winter of the Soviet Military: Cohesion or Collapse?

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The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this Estimate:
The Central Intelligence Agency
The Defense Intelligence Agency
The National Security Agency
The Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State

also participating:
The Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army
The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy
The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force
The Director of Intelligence, Headquarters, Marine Corps

This Estimate was approved for publication by the National Foreign Intelligence Board.

This Estimate is one of a series to be published in the coming weeks on various crises facing the former USSR.

The multiplicity of problems facing the new governments and their limited ability to cope with them make it likely that one or more of these problems will take on "worst case" proportions. This Estimate focuses on the cohesion of the Soviet military only over the winter and does not address all the components that constitute current Soviet military capability.

Key Judgments

The Winter of the Soviet Military: Cohesion or Collapse?

- Forces unleashed by the collapse of the Soviet system are breaking up its premier artifact—the Soviet military; the high command cannot halt this process. While a centralized command and control system continues to operate, political and economic collapse is beginning to fragment the military into elements loyal to the republics or simply devoted to self-preservation. These forces include:

  — Fragmentation:

    - Republic action to take control of units, equipment, and facilities could provoke conflicts of loyalty within the armed forces.

    - Shortages of basic necessities are prompting commanders of major formations to seek ties to local political bodies.

    - Commanders who do not receive local support may act on their own to seize or extort basic necessities.

  — Shortages:

    - Housing shortfalls continue to undermine morale and cohesion.

    - Traditionally first in line for high-tech resources, the military now has difficulty obtaining food and fuel.

    - Triple-digit inflation and the lack of a military budget threaten pay.

— Erosion of legitimacy and discipline:

- Since the August coup, questioning of traditional discipline has increased, and officers face difficult decisions about whom to obey.

- The disappearance of an external threat has increased officer disorientation.

- Massive officer cuts further erode discipline and morale. The uncertain future, coupled with a general lack of transferable job skills, heightens officer concern.

• The picture with respect to cohesion in the armed forces is mixed:

— [redacted] we have detected little change in the day-to-day activity of much of the force, suggesting unit integrity and nominal responsiveness to the chain of command.

— On the other hand, senior Soviet officers acknowledge serious problems, and a growing body of anecdotal evidence indicates an increasing tendency for unit commanders to challenge orders that threaten the well-being of their troops.

The armed forces are likely over the winter to continue to exhibit basic unit integrity and responsiveness, but, as the center fails to provide essential goods and services, the established chain of command will become increasingly irrelevant.

• Moreover, merely getting through the winter will present a false picture of military cohesion and stability. The most likely scenario will be continued decay and breakup of the Soviet armed forces. Halting this trend would require countering the centrifugal forces at work in the former Soviet Union and a major improvement in the economic conditions now affecting the military.

• Although less likely, there is still a significant chance of rapid disintegration and widespread violence if a large number of units seek autonomy or military organization collapses.

• Even less likely is the involvement of the armed forces in a large-scale civil war between or within major republics during the winter.

Discussion

Armies are microcosms of their societies; often indeed their core.

Michael Howard
The Lessons of History

Everything I have devoted my whole life to building is collapsing.

Suicide Note of Marshal Akhromeyev

Forces unleashed by the collapse of the Soviet system are breaking up its premier artifact—the Soviet military. While a centralized command and control system continues to operate, political and economic collapse threatens to fragment the military into elements loyal to the republics or simply devoted to self-preservation. Widespread shortages are depriving military personnel and their families of basic necessities, damaging morale. The events surrounding the failed coup and the collapse of the Communist Party challenge the moral basis of the officer corps, the authority of the center, and the chain of command. The disappearance of the perceived Western threat and the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact have increased the sense of disorientation among officers. These forces threaten military cohesion, that is, the ability of units at all levels to maintain organizational integrity and respond to orders from an acknowledged chain of command.

Stresses on the Military

Fragmentation

Plans by several republic and regional governments to take control of units, facilities, and equipment on their territory will increase pressure on military unity. So far, these plans amount largely to declarations of intent, but, should a republic decide to take control of a major unit, installation, or nuclear weapons, a showdown with the center could provoke conflicts of loyalty within the armed forces. Defense Minister Shaposhnikov and Interior Minister Barannikov, for example, stated in November that force would be used to counter republic attempts to turn such declarations into reality.

We believe that through the winter more large military formations will seek ties to local political entities. Many units have longstanding ties to republics or subrepublic areas from which they receive economic essentials. A few Ground Forces units in Byelorussia, Ukraine, and Russia already have offered allegiance to the republics where they are stationed. Failing a local accommodation, some unit commanders may try to take direct control of supplies or, alternatively, engage in warlord-like extortion.

The shift in political power to the republics has allowed the nationalist genie to escape from the Stalinist bottle, a condition that hastens fragmentation. Ukraine's situation illustrates one especially dramatic aspect of the pressure of nationalism. Its declaration of independence and demand for its own forces threaten to split the Soviet military. Ukrainians constitute some 30 percent of the officer corps and 17 percent of the conscripts, according to Soviet sources. Many of these personnel may join the Ukrainian armed forces.

As a result of the accommodation by the central Ministry of Defense (MOD) to republic demands for a "stay at home" conscription policy, Ground Force units in the republics are becoming more homogeneous (68 percent of Azerbaijan-based units are Azeri). This process, combined with republic concern about possible violence to obtain supplies, may lead to "creeping absorption" of units by local governments.

Shortages of Basic Goods and Services

The Soviet military, traditionally first in line for high-tech resources, now finds it difficult to obtain food and fuel (see figure). It can no longer command the

delivery of basic items across republic boundaries amid widespread shortages and a growing barter system. Industrial and agricultural enterprises increasingly ignore orders to supply the armed forces in return for "wooden rubles."

Units throughout the military confront worsening shortages:

Housing shortfalls continue to undermine military morale and cohesion:

- Soviet media reported in November that troops in the Baltic states—including an elite airborne unit—refused to leave until "normal social and living conditions are created at their new postings."

Military pay is also threatened. Salary increases have not kept pace with triple-digit inflation. Some units have not been paid on time, a problem that will become more widespread in the absence of a militar budget. Yel'tsin recently promised that Russia will pay the military (and double their pay), but in the short run this probably will require printing more money, thereby increasing inflation.

The capacity of the armed forces to deal with these problems is limited. Military command and control, logistics, and personnel systems are designed for central control and have only limited ability to respond to current developments. Despite such resources as military farms and reserves of food, fuel, and other commodities

commanders look elsewhere for help. Units get supplies from civilian enterprises in return for labor and sell or rent military equipmen.. The Chief of the General Staff has asked the Soviet public to donate to a newly created charity for the military. Clearly, such makeshift efforts will not solve the problem. Only improvement in the economy coupled with either interrepublic agreement on military funding or complete breakup into republic armed forces can do that.

Erosion of Legitimacy and Discipline

Soviet officers also face fundamental questions of loyalty and discipline. They are uncertain how to act in the present chaotic political situation. In theory, the armed forces are under control of the central state apparatus, but some officers question its legitimacy and believe that no one is in charge.

Since the August coup attempt, questioning of traditional military discipline has spread within the officer corps. The actions of senior officers—Defense Minister Yazov supported the coup while Air Force Chief Shaposhnikov opposed it—exacerbated splits in the officer corps and further weakened its cohesion.

Officers face increasingly difficult decisions about whom to obey. Those who supported the "right side" while disobeying their superiors—such as the Pacific Fleet officers who supported Yel'tsin—are sometimes praised. Others who followed orders are condemned.

Traditional obedience to orders is no longer adequate; officers are not to obey a "clearly criminal" order. But they have been given no clear guidance on what constitutes such an order.

Massive officer reductions further erode discipline and morale. Gorbachev's announcement in December 1988 of a unilateral reduction of 500,000 men included a cut of about 100,000 officers, and additional cuts are scheduled. Most Soviet officers, to a much greater degree than Western counterparts, lack transferable skills; the uncertain future intensifies their fear.

Units Become Pressure Points

The effects of these pressures—fragmentation, shortages, and the erosion of legitimacy and discipline—come together at the garrison, divisional, and regimental levels. Individual commanders must deal directly with these new problems. On the whole, they have done a reasonably good job. Whatever their internal problems, most Soviet units retain their basic structure and equipment and, with varying degrees of success, continue some routine operations and training. With no clear alternative, most Soviet officers follow the well-worn patterns of the past.

Prospects for the Winter

Over the winter it is likely that the armed forces will maintain cohesion. We expect cohesion to hold whether the armed forces continue to decay under the nominal control of central authorities or whether agreements among republics lead to division of the armed forces among them. The latter case would mean the end of the traditional Soviet military. Even in a situation where its basic structures are maintained, however, the military will likely lose control of some units to republics and localities, or even collapse. Such loss of control could lead to incidents of localized violence.

Decay will continue. The pressures undermining the military cannot be checked or alleviated over the next several months. The situation—and the military's condition after the winter—will vary by service and from republic to republic. Simultaneous and interdependent outcomes are possible. The ultimate character of the outcome will depend on the military's institutional coherence; its allegiance to civil authorities; its ability to satisfy basic needs; and its willingness to accept increasing hardship and uncertainty.

Our conclusion that the armed forces are likely to maintain cohesion over the winter reflects the following:

- Military service, for all its problems, will continue to be more appealing to many than a return to civilian life. The availability of resources in military supply channels and reserve stockpiles, in contrast to bleak civil prospects, will keep many units largely intact.
- Most officers support military subordination to civil authority.
- Yel'tsin has promised to fund the MOD, albeit with major cuts.

Getting through the winter relatively peacefully, however, could present a false picture of military cohesion and stability. Spring will find the military under increased pressures and with fewer resources. Absent interrepublic political and economic agreements, there will be even less hope of a solution to the problems facing the military. The reliability of military forces ordered to take unpopular actions, such as suppression of civil unrest, is open to serious question. The effect of such orders probably would be to accelerate the disintegration of the armed forces.

Ironically, one of the most disruptive, but least likely, developments—a coup initiated by the military—would require cohesion in the units involved to ensure that orders would be obeyed. The unsettled atmosphere in the officer corps, confusion about the legitimacy of traditional authority, and a reluctance to take action that might accelerate military disintegration inhibit such an act.

Such a coup attempt would reflect a desperate judgment by military leaders that there was no other alternative. A failed coup attempt could precipitate a descent into civil war.

Alternative Outcomes

Though unlikely, there is still a significant chance of outcomes involving the severe degradation or destruction of organizational cohesion. These include widespread local unit autonomy and total collapse of the armed forces:

- *Widespread local unit autonomy.* Traditionally strong ties between some units and local civilian authorities and the trend toward local and regional autarky in the economy could produce even more fragmentation in the military structure, leading to autonomous action by units operating in their own interest. The armed forces would retain unit cohesion but fragment on a regional, rayon, or oblast basis. The pressure on military officers to deal with local civilian authorities on a basis of food for

loyalty or to ensure more military influence in civil affairs could become stronger. Unit accommodations with local authorities would bolster local ties and lead to allegiance to republic or subrepublic governments. On the darker side, where local authorities refused cooperation, units could assume local control or, alternatively, extort supplies from local authorities.

- *Collapse.* Conditions worse than we anticipate—widespread failure to provide military personnel and their families with basic goods and services, collapse of discipline, and lawlessness throughout society—would destroy existing military organization. Large numbers of soldiers would desert. Gangs of deserters would take what they wanted from the civilian population.

Even less likely, though most violent, is the involvement of the armed forces in large-scale civil war within or between major republics during the winter. Triggering events could be resistance by the center or Russia to republic efforts to assume control of military forces or equipment on their territory or, alternatively, violence involving Russian minorities in a non-Russian republic. Such conflict would be especially dangerous if the control of nuclear weapons were at stake. Conflicts between republics other than Russia and Ukraine may be more likely but, while violent, probably would remain localized.

Least likely are conditions, much better than we anticipate, that could halt the decay and breakup of the Soviet armed forces. Such an outcome would require major improvement in the economic conditions now affecting the military and countering the centrifugal forces at work in the former USSR.

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